Catharine Gurvin Collection

Finding Aid

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CATHARINE GARVIN COLLECTION

17 folders; 0.2 cubic feet

Historical Note

In the summer of 1863, Cornelius Garvin (b. 1845), a resident of the Rensselaer County Almshouse, was sold as a substitute into the Union army by the home's superintendent. Eighteen-year-old Cornelius, called "Con," was mentally disabled in some way and had been declared an incurable "idiot" by the Marshall Infirmary, located in Troy, New York. He had then been placed in the county almshouse by his mother, Catharine (d. c1896), because she could not care for him at home. When Catharine went to visit her son on September 7, 1863, the superintendent informed her that Con was in the army and showed her the money he had received as payment for the boy. Catharine wrote later, "It was very cruel to sell my idiot son."

Catharine Garvin spent the rest of the 1860s looking for Cornelius. Although he was thought to have been enlisted in the 52nd New York Infantry Regiment and an official army investigation was conducted, she never found him or learned his fate. She ultimately accepted the likelihood he was dead, as the army investigation had concluded. She applied for and received a survivor's pension from the U.S. government.

Catharine continued to live in Troy, New York, until around 1890 when she returned permanently to Ireland. Because she was an American citizen, she continued to receive her pension until her death in County Limerick around 1896.

Provenance

The documents in the Catharine Garvin Collection were gathered by Catharine in the course of her search for her son and her application to receive and keep her survivor's pension. When she returned to her native Ireland around 1890, she took her papers with her. It is unclear who held them after her death c1896, but the papers remained in Ireland.

According to the December 18, 1964, issue of the *Troy* [New York] *Record*, the papers resurfaced in 1940s when D.J. Ryan of Ireland's *Cork Examiner* contacted Troy mayor John J. Ahern. Ryan, a relative of Catharine Garvin, told Ahern that he had a collection of Catharine's papers, including a letter from Abraham Lincoln, that he wanted to sell. Ahern's reply is not reported, but the papers must have made the transatlantic journey at some point during the next four decades because in 1984 The Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne (now the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection) purchased the Catharine Garvin Collection of 60 documents from Lincoln collector and dealer James Hickey of Elkhart, Illinois.

Scope and Content

The Catharine Garvin Collection comprises fifty-two manuscript documents dated between September 1863 and July 1894, as well as four 1863-64 newspaper clippings, three undated narratives of the Garvin case, and one note written by President Abraham Lincoln to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. The manuscript documents include:

- passes allowing Catharine to visit the Army of the Potomac and talk to men in the 52nd New York, most with the loyalty oath signed by her
- written statements from soldiers who claimed to have known or served with Cornelius Garvin
- letters written for Catharine Garvin to various officials, including Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and signed by her
- letters and documents supporting her search signed by officials ranging from the mayor of Troy, New York, to congressmen and army generals
- a note dated May 21, 1864, written on the back of an envelope by President Abraham Lincoln to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, which reads: "There is reason to believe this Cornelius Garvin is an idiot, and that he is kept in the 52nd N.Y. concealed & denied to avoid an exposure of guilty parties. Will the Secretary of War please have the thing probed. A. Lincoln"
- June 1865 War Department documents related to the official army investigation of the Garvin case
- pension documents

The collection can be viewed online at: http://contentdm.acpl.lib.in.us/cdm/search/collection/p16089coll38/searchterm/garvin/field/all/mode/all/conn/and/.

Folder List

Folder	Item Numbers
Handwritten narrative, no date	71200908301400
Newspaper clippings, 1863-1864	71200908301401 71200908301402 71200908301403 71200908301404
Unsigned note, no date	71200908301405
Correspondence, September 28, 1863	71200908301406
Correspondence, March 1864	71200908301407 71200908301408 71200908301409

Correspondence and Documents, April 1864	71200908301410
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	71200908301413
Correspondence and Documents, May 1864	71200908300093
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	71200908301419
	71200908301420
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	71200908301422
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Correspondence and Document, June 1864	71200908301425
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Correspondence and Document, September 1864	71200908301427
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Correspondence, October 1864	71200908301429
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Correspondence, April-May 1865	71200908301435
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Correspondence, June 1865	71200908301438
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	71200908301441
Correspondence and Documents, 1866	71200908301442
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Correspondence, 1867-1868	71200908301447 71200908301448 71200908301449
Pension Documents, 1866-1894	71200908301450 71200908301451 71200908301452 71200908301453 71200908301454 71200908301455 71200908301456
Printed Narratives	71200908301457 71200908301458

Jane E. Gastineau, June 2015